

HOW TO... Use calligraphy on your PC

Create beautiful handwriting strokes on your computer with Adam Banks' help

If you fancy trying your hand at calligraphy but you can't find that kit your auntie gave you for your ninth birthday, your PC has the answer. All you need is an image-editing program with a calligraphic brush tool, which you'll find in most mid-range programs such as Photoshop Elements and Corel Paint Shop Pro.

Our PC calligraphy primer will set you on the right track, but you can find plenty more advice in calligraphy books and online. Refer to <http://vaxxine.com/mikwit/lessons/lesson3.htm> to complete your foundational hand.

This is one of those tasks that can benefit from a graphics tablet, although it's still possible with a mouse. The good news is that if you want a graphics tablet only to do a bit of calligraphy on your PC, there's no need to spend a lot. As you draw just one character at a time, you can get away with a very small (and therefore cheap) tablet such as the Genius MousePen 8x6 (£36 inc VAT from www.microdirect.co.uk). It's even better if you have a decent-sized high-quality tablet; Wacom's Intuos3 A5 Wide (£176 inc VAT, www.zomp.net) can accommodate nice sweeping strokes without demanding too much desk space. Touch-screen PCs are also good for this purpose, as long as you can get the screen at a comfortable angle for drawing.

1 Run Photoshop Elements (we used version 5, but the same tools are available in earlier editions) and select Edit and Enhance Photos. Press Ctrl-N to make a new blank document and choose the A4 preset. To enable you to combine your calligraphy with other artwork, photos and backgrounds, start by creating a new layer. Go to Layer, New, Layer or press Shift-Ctrl-N. In the dialog box that appears, give your layer a name and press Return.

Before you start drawing letters, you need to set up a grid to act as a guide. Go to View, Grid to display a grid, and make sure View, Snap to, Grid is unticked. Then customise your grid in Edit, Preferences, Grid. Your grid should show the height of a lower-case or 'minuscule' letter, known as the 'x height', which should be about four times the width of your pen nib. A good nib width (which you'll set in step 2) is 1/2in, which works out at 25 pixels. So set your gridlines 100 pixels apart, and set Subdivisions to '4'.

2 Press Z for the Zoom tool (magnifier) and click repeatedly at the top left of the page until the display is at 100 per cent. Depending on your screen size, you may find it easier to work at 200 per cent. Press D to set the Foreground colour to black. Even if you plan to create coloured lettering, it's always best to draw in black, for maximum contrast, then change the colour later if necessary.

We'll start by practising a 'foundational hand', a standard style of simple hand-drawn lettering. This requires a wide nib held at a 30° angle. Press B for the Brush tool and, in the Options bar at the top, make sure the first icon is selected in the group at the left – the plain Brush tool. Click on the drop-down menu to the right of this to show the brush picker. From the menu of brush sets, choose Calligraphic Brushes. Choose the brush tip labelled '28' or 'Flat 28 px'. Then click More Options, at the far right of the Options bar, and set Angle to 30 degrees.

3 The first letter to try is a lower-case 'o'. Identify your first 4x4 grid square and position the cursor on the top line, just to the left of the centre. Click and drag anticlockwise to draw a semicircle, noticing how the angled nib

shapes the stroke. It'll take a few tries to get this right, but persevere. This is the hard part, and once you get the hang of it you'll be able to form all the other letters relatively easily. Remember you can press Ctrl+Z to undo and try again.

Try to make quick, confident strokes so your line doesn't wobble. If you find you can't stop your line wobbling, check that you turned off View, Snap to, Grid in Step one.

4 Complete the 'o' by drawing a second semicircle, starting again from the top and going clockwise. Why draw it in this order? You'll understand when you move on to try your next character, 'c'. Finish the downstroke at its narrowest at the bottom right, then add a short stroke at the top to complete the shape.

5 To create letters with vertical strokes you need to master serifs. Start in the centre of a grid square (in the space, not on the lines) and draw a short line that curves on to the gridline at the right. When you hit the gridline, stop and put a spare finger on the Shift key. Then start from where you left off and complete the downward stroke; the Shift key keeps it straight.

6 When you get to the bottom of a letter with a vertical stroke, draw a final short stroke down from the top gridline to complete the stroke with a point. This stroke completion occurs two gridlines below the baseline for descenders, such as 'p', or two gridlines above the x-height for ascenders, such as 'd'.

Combine these elements to form the rest of the minuscule letters before moving on to the capitals (majuscule), which are rather trickier. Once you master the foundational hand, you can experiment with more creative lettering. ☑

